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Low-Performing Schools, Medical Marijuana, and Campus Carry Bills Pass by Sine Die

The 2017 session of the Georgia General Assembly ended on March 30, with both chambers working past midnight on Sine Die—the final day. Gov. Nathan Deal has 40 days from the close of session—until Tuesday, May 9—to sign or veto bills and line items in the FY18 budget. Deal’s office publishes a [running list](#) of legislation he signs, and any veto statements will likely be issued via a [press release](#) by May 9.

The FY18 budget passed before Sine Die on March 22, but the fates of several other bills weren’t decided until the final moments of the 40th day. As legislators hurried to act on issues before the end of the 2017 session, bills were amended, language from bills was added to other legislation that was stripped of its original content, and discrepancies were resolved by conference committees.

Since the 2017 session was the first year of a two-year session, bills that failed to pass are eligible to be acted upon in 2018.

Low-Performing Schools

[HB 338](#) (Rep. Kevin Tanner, 9th) was introduced as a comprehensive intervention strategy for chronically underperforming schools and offered an alternative to the Opportunity School District (OSD) plan that Georgia voters didn’t approve in Nov. 2016. The House passed the bill on March 1, and the Senate passed it on March 24 after making some changes. The House agreed to the Senate’s changes on March 28.

Retitling it “The First Priority Act—Helping Turnaround Schools Put Students First,” the Senate also clarified the financing of the legislation so that the State Board of Education is responsible for ensuring “that all necessary department resources and supports are made available.”

The Governor's Office of Student Achievement will be responsible for ensuring that low-performing schools receive priority for receiving federal and state funds when awarding grants. Funds for the First Priority Act were also included in the final version of the FY18 budget.

[HB 237](#) (Rep. Brooks Coleman, 97th), which passed on the final day of the session, provides another financial source for the reforms. The bill authorizes the Public Education Innovation Fund Foundation to receive private donations to be used for public-school grants aimed at implementing academic and organizational innovations to improve student achievement. The Senate amended the bill to clarify that the amount of tax credits allowed for donations to the Foundation is capped at \$5 million per year, and the House agreed to those changes.

HB 338 is now with Deal, who can sign the bill or do nothing, either of which will make it law, or veto it. HB 237 is also being reviewed by Deal.

Adoption Reform

The Senate Judiciary Committee amended the House's version of [HB 159](#) (Rep. Bert Reeves, 34th) to allow state-funded private agencies to refuse to place children with same-sex parents. The bill was then sent to the Senate Rules Committee, which recommitted the bill to the Senate Judiciary Committee for further discussion. That committee took no further action on the bill despite requests from House Speaker David Ralston and Deal that the legislation be allowed to move forward without the Senate committee's amendment.

On the 39th day of the session, the House Judiciary Committee incorporated original language from HB 159 into [SB 130](#) (Sen. Blake Tillery, 19th), which addresses a juvenile offender's right to an attorney and the procedure for waiving that right. The full House subsequently passed the amended version of SB 130, and it was returned to the Senate for its consideration of the House's changes.

The Senate did not take action on SB 130 until minutes before final adjournment on the 40th day. After debate, the Senate passed a motion to recommit the bill to the Senate Judiciary Committee, which ended the bill's chance of passing this session.

Medical Marijuana

[HB 65](#) (Rep. Allen Peake, 141st) expands the number of diagnoses that legally can be treated with cannabis oil to include Tourette's syndrome, autism spectrum disorder, epidermolysis bullosa, Alzheimer's disease, HIV, AIDS, and peripheral neuropathy. The bill also states that cancer and other currently covered diseases may be treated beyond just the end stages.

The House passed HB 65 on March 1. It was then assigned to the Senate Health and Human Services Committee, which took no action on the bill.

[SB 16](#) (Sen. Ben Watson, 1st)—another bill dealing with the use of cannabis oil for medical purposes, specifically to treat autism spectrum disorder—passed the Senate on Feb. 16. The bill was then assigned to the House Judiciary Committee, which stripped the bill of its original language and substituted in the language from HB 65.

The full House passed the substitute version of SB 16 on March 28, and the Senate agreed to the House changes. SB 16 is now with Deal, who can sign the bill or do nothing, either of which will make it law, or veto it.

Campus Carry

HB 280 (Rep. Mandi Ballinger, 23rd), known as the Campus Carry Bill, allows individuals ages 21 and older to carry guns on public university campuses—except into dormitories, athletic events, and preschool or daycare centers.

The House passed the bill on March 3, and the Senate passed a substitute version of the bill on March 28. Leaders in the House and Senate appointed a conference committee to reach agreement on a final version of the bill. Although it seemed the conferees were at an impasse at one point, they reached agreement late on the 40th day.

The final version of HB 280 stipulates exceptions to locations concealed weapons are allowed on public postsecondary campuses, including:

- buildings or property used for athletic sporting events or student housing, including fraternity and sorority houses;
- any preschool or child care space located within buildings or real property;
- any room or space being used for classes related to a college and career academy;
- any room or space being used for classes in which high-school students are registered through a dual-enrollment program; and
- faculty, staff, or administrative offices where disciplinary proceedings are conducted.

Only weapons license holders are allowed to carry weapons on the campuses, and the weapons must remain concealed. A license holder who violates the restrictions will be guilty of a misdemeanor, punishable by a fine of \$25, and no term of imprisonment. A person who is not a license holder who violates the terms will be guilty of a felony, punishable by a fine of no more than \$10,000 and by imprisonment of no less than two years.

HB 280 is now with Deal for his review. During final votes in the House and Senate, the bill's presenters stated that representatives of the governor's office were involved in the conference committee's negotiations of the language.